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ABSTRACT

This study followed up 328 child participants (150 children with mild to moderate developmental delays and 178 typical children) ages 3-5 years to determine the effects of preschool placement (mainstream or segregated setting) on later school age special or regular class placement. Evaluation after 3 years indicated that children with developmental delays from segregated preschool settings were twice as likely to retain special education eligibility in kindergarten as their mainstream counterparts and were three times as likely to receive service in segregated settings. A quarter of the segregated preschool group and 62 percent of the mainstream preschool group moved into regular kindergarten placements. Over the 3 years, typical children were increasingly placed in classes in which mainstreaming of some children with disabilities was occurring. The findings indicate increased use of mainstreaming to provide children with inclusive education. Implications of the findings are discussed in terms of fiscal aspects of programming for children with special needs, teacher training, and policy regarding initial placement decisions. Appended is a list of resources for information on early childhood policies and programs. (Contains 23 references.) (DB)

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POLICY AND PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

PRESCHOOL PLACEMENT DECISIONS:

ARE THEY PREDICTORS OF FUTURE PLACEMENT?

Linda J. Miller, Phillip S. Strain, John McKinley,

Kevin Heckathorn, and Susan Miller

July, 1993

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Linda J. Miller, Phillip S. Strain, John McKinley, Kevin Heckathorn, and Susan Miller

Although it is recognized that a number of social and developmental benefits occur for children who participate in integrated programming, there is also agreement that important questions remain about the long-term effects of mainstreaming (Lamorey & Bricker, 1992; Odom & McEvoy, 1988). One such question concerns program effectiveness as measured by the child's continuing eligibility for special education service once in elementary school.

The use of school-age placement to assess the impact of the preschool experience is premised on the rationale that early intervention programs are intended to provide services that lessen the effects of handicapping conditions or other special needs that may affect development (Smith & Strain, 1988). Thus, a function of early intervention is to assist children with the transition into regular education programs or to reduce the need for special education services later in life (Edgar, Hegglelund, & Fischer, 1988). It follows then that the movement of children with special needs into regular education classrooms or less restrictive environments indicates the beneficial impact of early intervention.

Edgar et al. (1988) followed public special education program graduates identified in preschool as having mild to severe delays to determine the types of settings into which these children were placed when they entered school-age programs. Approximately two-thirds of the children were placed in school-age special education classrooms including self-contained or resource room settings, while the remaining children moved into regular education classrooms. Examination of the stability of these placements during a subsequent two year period revealed that the vast majority of the children remained in

the initial placement setting. Of the children who did change placement, 62% moved into less restrictive environments.

In another longitudinal study, Hume and Dannenbring (1989) followed children screened and served by early childhood special education programs to assess the continuity of preschool placements with school-age placements. Of the children who were special education eligible as preschoolers, follow-up through third grade revealed that 76% retained eligibility for special education. Further, in a case study of four early childhood special education programs, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, and Weiss (1988) found that children targeted for special education service in preschool maintained such status up to 9 years after initial identification.

These follow-up efforts have provided important information about the placement of children with special needs from early intervention programs into school-age regular education or special education settings. However, an issue of considerable interest is whether preschool placement in a mainstream versus segregated setting results in similar eligibility and placement trends. Specifically, there are two questions of interest: (1) whether children from preschool mainstream settings are more likely to achieve typical status and move into regular education classrooms than their counterparts from segregated preschool settings, and (2) whether service in a preschool mainstream or segregated setting results in continued placement in a school-age mainstream or segregated placement? The scarcity of comparative information for children with similar levels of delay in mainstream versus segregated programs emphasizes the importance of these questions. This information also has current and practical value as more children with special needs are placed into mainstream programs (Stainback, Stainback, & Bunch, 1989). Finally, to provide a more complete look at integration practices and to ultimately assist in clarifying fiscal, teacher training, and policy issues, a third question is: what is the frequency of mainstream placements for typical children?

Conducting Follow-Up Based on Preschool Placement

To address these questions, follow-up of 328 child participants originally in mainstream, segregated, or typical-children-only preschool programs was conducted across three years. In the first year, a comparison group of children with developmental delays and a comparison group of typical children in mainstream, segregated, and typical-children-only preschool settings were identified and parental consents obtained. Some of the children were tracked for one year following preschool and others for two years. The different follow-up times were necessary as some of the children moved into a first school-age placement (kindergarten) during the second year of the study and others during the third year, dependent upon their age.

Who Participated?

Involved in the follow-up were 328 children, 178 were typical children and 150 were diagnosed as having mild to moderate developmental delays. They comprised two comparison groupings: (a) children with developmental delays in mainstream settings (96) and children with developmental delays in segregated settings (54); and, (b) typical children in mainstream settings (96) and typical children in typical-children-only settings (82). All of the children were three to five years old.

None of the typical children selected were receiving services under a special education plan (Individualized Education Program [IEP]) or in the referral stage for special service. Conversely, all the children with developmental delays were receiving service according to an IEP. Also, they evidenced a minimum of six months delay in three major developmental areas. According to results of the *Battelle Developmental Inventory: Screening Test* (Newborg, Stock, Wnek, Guidubaldi, & Svinicki, 1988), there were no significant differences in any of the assessment areas between the groups of

children with developmental delays in the mainstream versus segregated arrangements or the groups of typical children in the mainstream versus typical-children-only settings.

From What Settings Were the Children Drawn?

Children were in one of three major categories of setting: mainstream, segregated, and typical-children-only preschool programs. In mainstream programs, typical children comprised more than 50% of the classroom population (Odom & McEvoy, 1988). Across the participating districts, the average ratio of children with developmental delays to typical children was 5 to 22, with a range of 3 to 9 children with developmental delays in these programs. In segregated programs 100% of the student population was administratively identified as developmentally delayed and in typical-children-only settings 100% of the children were not identified as delayed or disabled.

The mainstream programs were drawn from 7 school districts across the state of Pennsylvania. Comparison groups of segregated programs for children with special needs and typical-children-only programs were chosen within each of these districts. The participating 7 districts represented a diverse range of population densities: 3 of the districts were in large cities with populations greater than 300,000, 2 districts were in medium-sized cities with approximate populations of 50,000, and 2 were in small towns with populations less than 20,000.

The definition of elementary school programs as mainstream, segregated, or typical-children-only was similar to preschool designations, namely: (a) in mainstream programs, typical children comprised more than 50% of the classroom population and the teacher in the classroom served as the primary instructor for the students, (b) in segregated programs for children with special needs, regardless of the program's location in a public/private school or center, 100% of the classroom population was receiving service according to an IEP, and the classroom teacher was the primary

instructor, and (c) in typical-children-only programs, 100% of the classroom population did not receive IEP-specified service.

The Findings

In this follow-up, the eligibility and placement trends were identified for all children. Specifically, "status" referred to childrens' eligibility or non-eligibility for special education service; "typical status" indicated that special education service had not been designated and an IEP was not in effect. The term "placement" denoted childrens' participation in a segregated, mainstream, or typical-children-only setting. As noted, the children began follow-up in one of four groups: children with developmental delays in segregated settings, children with developmental delays in mainstream settings, typical children in mainstream settings, and typical children in typical-children-only settings.

What patterns emerged for the children with developmental delays?

Large differences in initial elementary school status and placement did occur for the comparison groups of children with developmental delays. Not only were children from segregated preschool settings twice as likely to retain special education eligibility in kindergarten than their mainstream counterparts, but they were at least three times more likely to receive service in segregated settings. These differences were even more pronounced in the second follow-up year. Of the segregated group, 89% retained or regained special education eligibility as compared to a stable 37% of the original preschool mainstream group. In terms of placement, service delivery in segregated settings was four times more frequent for the preschool segregated group than for the mainstream group.

While the patterns established during the first two years of elementary school placement point out glaring disparities between the groups, it is noteworthy that the

findings also indicated a mainstreaming trend as follow-up continued for both groups. A quarter of the segregated preschool group and 62% of the mainstream preschool group moved into typical-children-only kindergarten placements, a pattern which either acknowledged the success of early intervention, or conversely, district policy to pursue general education rather than special education service in the first year of school-age programming. According to Love and Logue (1992), this is a common practice which reflects the belief that most children adjust to kindergarten with little difficulty.

What patterns emerged for the typical children?

For typical children in the mainstream and those in typical-children-only preschool groups, the vast majority of children in each group maintained their typical status in the first and second year after preschool. Similarly, the mainstream and typical-children-only preschool groups were also alike in several ways regarding initial elementary school placement patterns: (a) both participated in segregated programs at low rates, signifying few special education identifications; (b) each was enrolled in mainstream kindergarten programs at rates of 39% and 47%, respectively; and (c) both participated in typical-children-only programs more than half the time. As found with the comparisons involving children with developmental delays, however, there was a mainstreaming increase for each group in the year following kindergarten. The typical group originally involved in preschool mainstreaming had the higher subsequent occurrence of such programming. Specifically, there was a 35% increase for the mainstream group and a 13% increase for those originally in preschool typical-children-only settings. These increases produced total mainstream participation rates of 74% and 60%, respectively, in the second year of follow-up.

Although too few of the typical-children-only group moved on to second year placements to draw any conclusions about the placement patterns, in general, the

findings do indicate widespread use of mainstreaming options in these elementary schools.

Implications of the Findings

In a recent text on exceptional children, Heward and Orlansky (1992) reported that over two-thirds of the 4.5 million children and youth presently identified as exceptional in the United States are taught in mainstream settings. As supported in this paper, follow-up of the groups also pointed to a mainstreaming trend, not only by children with special needs but by typical children as well. This possibility, that children with and without special needs, are increasingly exposed to inclusive education has several important implications.

Fiscal

There is currently considerable interest in the costs associated with mainstreaming versus segregated programming for children with special needs. During 1988 two studies were conducted to determine the comparative costs of these administrative arrangements. The study conducted by Singer and Raphael involved 571 students with special needs in a three state area and the study conducted by Moore, Strange, Schwartz, and Braddock involved 60 school districts located in 18 states (both cited in Jones, 1991). Both studies reflected lower costs for less restrictive or mainstream placements, e.g., the lowest average cost was reported for students in full-time regular education programs, higher costs for students based in a regular class with some pullout for special instruction, and the highest costs for students based in a special class in a regular school. While this fiscal evidence strongly favored regular class placement, Jones (1991) cautioned that, first and foremost, those making placement choices for children eligible for special education must follow the requirements of Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (usually referred to as P. L. 94-142).

That is, the unique needs of each child must be of pre-eminent concern. Efforts toward cost containment that result in models of programming that force a fit for the child with special needs, that provide too few resources or resource personnel, or that formally or informally discourage the identification of children for certain services, may result in costs far beyond those measured in contemporary dollars and cents. The dilemma is this —how to provide the best and most appropriate education for all children while the realities of fixed or diminishing fiscal resources serve to promote spending cuts, or at the very least, status quo budgets.

Teacher training

There is also recognition that commensurate teacher support is fundamental to the success of mainstreaming. In recent years, parents and educators alike have increasingly advocated the integration of all students into the mainstream of regular education (Stainback et al., 1989). Whereas past practice sought this option predominantly for children with mild disabilities, the present movement maintains that children with severe and profound disabilities also experience increased benefits. However, central to an integrated model of educating children with and without special needs is collaboration among regular education and special education personnel (Lilly, 1986; Smith, Salisbury, & Rose, 1992; West & Cannon, 1987).

A collaborative model of service is not easily accomplished, however, as separate tracks of personnel training (McCollum & Maude, in press; Miller, 1992) and subsequent teaching experience distinguish practice as well as promote differences in attitudes towards mainstreaming (Miller, Strain, Boyd, Hunsicker, McKinley, & Wu, 1992; Peck, Hayden, Wandschneider, Peterson, & Richarz, 1989; Rose & Smith, 1992). For example, Kearney and Durand (1992) surveyed postsecondary schools of education in New York State and concluded there was insufficient coursework and field experience to prepare

general education preservice teachers for mainstream classroom settings. Similarly, Leyser and Abrams (1986) reported that practicing teachers identified the need for more training about the rationale of mainstreaming, instruction and assessment strategies, classroom management, consultation with other professionals, and assisting student understanding of individual differences.

Peck et al. (1989) found that the concerns of both regular and special education teachers often centered on the possibility of conflicts with other teachers over program goals and philosophy. As found by Rose and Smith (1993), undergirding these concerns were issues of attitudes and values. Their national survey assessed the presence of barriers to placing preschoolers with disabilities in mainstream environments and found that values and attitudes were rank ordered as the second most important disincentive. Specifically, the focus of attitude differences centered around: (a) turf issues such as holding onto segregated systems of education and a "their children versus our children" belief; (b) concerns about teacher preparedness to manage and teach children with disabilities; (c) awareness issues related to specific disabilities, medical needs, curricula and methods; (d) communication / collaboration / respect concerns; and (e) "someone will lose" attitudes, which encompassed concerns that negative effects would result from merged delivery systems for children with disabilities and typical peers. It is reasonable to assume that the same or similar issues also concern teachers in elementary programs and that the growing occurrence of mainstreaming, for both children with and without special needs, necessitates a variety of preservice training and ongoing opportunities to promote effective communication and collaboration.

Policy

The trend toward greater mainstreaming in school-age programs also points to initial placement decisions as an important area for consideration. According to research

by Edgar et al. (1984), the first placement after preschool is a powerful predictor of future placement. As noted earlier, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, and Weiss (1988) found that children targeted for special education service in preschool maintained such status up to 9 years after initial identification. The longitudinal data of Edgar et al. (1988) also indicated a high stability of placement in elementary school special education programs for children previously in early childhood special education. However, the question to consider and study further is whether this pattern is primarily applicable to children who exit from segregated preschools. Our longitudinal study raises the possibility that differential placements may be better predicted by preschool placement than by the elementary school students' repertoire of skills.

While the data from this study did reveal more frequent and concentrated special education for those children exiting segregated preschool settings, it was also the case that 19% of the children with delays in the mainstream group retained special education eligibility after a year of typical status in kindergarten. According to an Executive Summary of the National Transition Study by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Policy and Planning (Love & Logue, 1992), it is the opinion of school personnel that most children adjust to the kindergarten experience with minimum difficulty. Although this is the case for many students, it is also known that children with developmental delays and other low-performing students may not have the skills to succeed in elementary school programs (Sainato & Lyon, 1989), particularly in programs that have a developmentally inappropriate academic focus (Bredenkamp, 1987). In these situations, it is not reasonable to assume that adjustment will be easy if the student lacks the social skill, basic academic skills, and academic support skills needed to manage the classroom instruction. These possibilities emphasize the need for structured exchange of information between personnel in the preschool and the school-age systems. However, Love and Logue (1992) found that only a small percentage of schools report systematic

communication between kindergarten teachers and previous caregivers or teachers about the entering kindergarten children. Clearly, it is important for school district personnel to establish lines of communication or forums where information about the strengths and needs demonstrated by the exiting preschoolers can be shared. Perhaps then we can address the identified skill needs more promptly at the school-age level and provide the uninterrupted and directed attention necessary.

The information provided from this follow-up and from past research illustrate the serious issues surrounding early intervention placement decisions. In particular, the differential patterns of status and placement following preschool found in this study for the children with developmental delays, compared to initial placement settings, suggest that vigilant attention and ongoing evaluation of school district policies and practices must be conducted in all phases of operation to ensure sound policy decisions.

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APPENDIX A

Resources for Information on Early Childhood Policies and Programs

Council for Administrators in Special Education (CASE)
of the Council for Exceptional Children
615 - 16th Street, NW
Albuquerque, NM 87104
(505) 243-7622

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091
(703) 620-3660

National Head Start Resource Access Program
Administration for Children, Youth and Families
Office of Human Development Services
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; P.O. Box 1182
Washington, D.C. 20013
(202) 245-0562

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
1509 - 16th Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20036-1426
(800) 424-2460

National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE)
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 320
King Street Station 1
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 519-3800

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System (NEC-TAS)
Suite 500; NCNB Plaza
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
(919) 962-2001

U.S. Office of Special Education Programs
Early Childhood Branch
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202
(202) 732-1084